



UNCONSCIOUS BIAS— CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE TAKES MORE THAN ‘ONE-AND-DONE’ TRAINING

HR veteran says a bottom-up, participatory approach, modeled on safety programs, can deliver better results

By *Russell Holt*

Reacting to recent racial unrest generated by concerns about systemic racism, many companies have rushed to offer unconscious-bias awareness training to their employees. These companies all have good intentions of improving diversity and inclusion by eliminating unconscious bias in their workplaces. However, as good as those intentions are, studies show we can't train biases out of anyone.

Moreover, hundreds of studies dating back to the 1930s suggest anti-bias training by itself does not reduce bias, alter behavior, or change the workplace¹.

LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT CRUCIAL

Research shows that trying to avoid implicit stereotyping through unconscious-bias training alone makes people project their biases through overcompensation

or unsuccessful thought suppression. Try not to think of a pink elephant, and you'll probably think of a pink elephant. Try not to think of the job candidate's race or gender, and you will probably think of nothing else.

Additionally, if unconscious bias awareness training is not conducted with the proper sensitivities toward all represented groups, it could actually backfire and spur resentment.

However, unconscious-bias training that is properly delivered, with an understanding of all the represented groups' sensitivities and that is part of a larger, more comprehensive effort to help improve diversity and inclusion, can help reduce bias, improve equity and create behavior change that fosters inclusion.

In order to cultivate an environment that allows individuals to flourish in the workplace and become fully engaged, the training has to be more than a one-and-done training program. Evidence shows unconscious-bias training is most effective when it is part of a broader effort involving a multifaceted process.

A good case in point is when members of TRSA decided we were going to be the best in class in safety. Through a concerted effort of TRSA members, we have brought about an industrywide cultural change where operators now view safety as a value that won't be compromised.

This change didn't happen with a few training sessions. It took a major commitment by industry leaders who had the vision to see how we could improve our industry and our operations, and they were committed to seeing the realization of that change. That same level of commitment will be required for our industry to realize a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

BEST IN CLASS DEI WORKPLACES

Coincidentally, some byproducts of the safety initiative have unintentionally

¹ Frank Dobbin, and Alexandra Kalev, "Why Doesn't Diversity Training Work" *Anthropology Now*, Volume 10, Number 2, Sept 2018: 48-55.

contributed to improving inclusion in our operations. For example, having employee-driven safety committees made up of groups from production and service that are drawn from diverse teams of participants helped create an environment of cooperative interdependence by working together on the common cause of improving safety.

These team members have access to information that they need to make informed decisions and are empowered to influence change; they function as a unit, often relying on members' individuality and unique perspectives to generate creative solutions to safety problems. These safety teams are a good example of building performance-based teams comprised of diverse members who, by their nature, foster inclusion.

Although there's no one "right" way to build a more diverse and inclusive workforce, there are some paths that tend to lead to greater success than others. Just as we did with safety initiatives, starting out on this journey with a clear vision and keeping the long view in mind helps.

Focusing on developing leadership social competencies is an essential element to include in a successful program. Leaders must be aware of the reality of their employees' life-cycle dynamic, including recruiting, hiring and promoting, and they must be aware of any barriers that might interfere with an applicant's entry into the company or an employee's efforts to advance within the company.

Another element to consider is building succession plans that identify deficiencies from under-represented groups that could be mitigated through training or other creative means of support.

For example, if four team members were placed into a succession plan all competing for a supervisor's job that had as one of its essential job duties the ability to speak English, and if a team member struggled with speaking English fluently, management could help level the playing field by offering English as a Second Language training courses to that employee.

Research shows that offering unconscious-bias training alone won't change the diversity/inclusion culture—unless it is part of a multifaceted effort led by committed, socially adept leaders who are aligned with their companies' Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) plans. In the commercial laundry industry, DEI programs range from start-up to mature. As TRSA members working together,

we intend to be the best in class in terms of DEI workplaces. **TS**

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